

PAUL, THE MAN

The letter to the Philippians was written in a special moment of Paul's life and was addressed to « all the saints in Christ ». At first, we have studied the socio-economical, socio-political and multi-religious environment of Philippi. Now, it is useful to understand who is Paul who presents himself to us, and what feelings inhabit him. The letter he wrote has been called « lettera più lettera », that is to say more than a letter ; Paul writes to those he knows as a friend. He wishes and hopes that the Philippians also take Christ as a central reference, both for their own persons and for their lives, and that communion with the Risen Christ generates joy, even in the difficult situations of suffering and captivity.

I. Paul, from the free man to the prisoner.

Paul was free to chose which destination he would privileged in his missionary journeys, to cover vast regions for the Gospel, to establish relationships with new peoples and cultures. Moved by the Spirit, he chose freely to go to Philippi, to share its inhabitants' life, accepting to be calumniated, emprisoned, expelled. Everything was not easy : to adhere to Jesus provoked a change for him : from the persecutor of Christians, he became persecuted for Jesus. Paul has had to insist on the concord and unity between the members of the first Christian community, composed of persons of different origins and cultures, exposed to inevitable misunderstandings and ruptures (cf Ph-2-3), the tension between Evodia and Syntykhe (Ph. 4-2). He faced the aggressive propaganda of adversaries determined to restore the purity of faith and to defend the purity of Mosaic Law.

Paul is now a prisoner in Rome. He is living his « sabbatic year ». A Jew is aware of what it means. In fact, every seventh year, the Jewish Law stated a twelve monts' pause during which the slaves were liberated and the fields were not cultivated. Of course people did not remain idle, but they marked a break. Indeed, Paul has much time for introspection, for making a synthesis of his past without Jesus and his luminous present in Jesus, the

treasure of his life, to spot the key points of his announcement of Christ dead and Risen, and at last to remember the communities he founded and left in good hands.

From his captivity, Paul thinks of and writes to the community of Philippi, Ephesus, Colossae, and to his very dear collaborator Philemon, and probably to his very « dear son » Timothy. His captivity contributed to spreading the Gospel in the city of Caesars. The news of Paul's fettering because of the Christian message had spread among the praetorians and citizens of Rome. Seeing Paul's resistance, many of them found courage to spread the Gospel : many did it out of conviction, some out of envy, others out of a spirit of dispute. « What then ? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached ; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice ». (Ph 1,18). The apostle can't help exhorting the Philippians to be firm in faith, walking in a way worthy of the Gospel.

II. Paul, a grateful man.

« *I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, (...) with joy for your fellowship in the Gospel from the first day until now* » (Ph 1, 3-5).

For Paul, « thanking » is not a simple act like thanking the Lord for having known the community of Philippi, thanking the Philippians for their kindness, when they show their solidarity, including by material assistance, or having sent Timothy to Rome to help Paul who is imprisoned. To say « thank you » is normal for a well-brought up person who says it for receiving a favour, obtaining help, accepting a gift, appreciating a visit. The occasions of saying « thank you » are many. This « thank you » is true when the giver and the receiver look into each others' eyes expressing the sincere feelings of their hearts. How ugly is the « thank you » let out not to appear rude, or out of interest, or uttered while looking elsewhere because we are absorbed by something else we think more important.

For Paul, it is a constant attitude of gratitude and thankfulness coming from his heart. This attitude is a way of being or presenting himself in truth, like the reflection of a solar soul or like the deliberately assumed form of a thankful behaviour. When this behaviour is depreciated, then it is only an exterior posture serving to evacuate the other's judgement.

Saul of Tarsis has trained himself to make this grateful attitude his own, strengthened along the years. For him, the focal points of his thankfulness were God, the Lord Jesus, and the example of the faith and love of the communities.

Each time he entered the Temple of Jerusalem, or frequented the synagogues to pray, Saul, a practising pharisean, had been trained to honour Yahweh, to recognize his full power, to commit his concerns to him. « *Know that he, the Lord, is God : he made us, we belong to him, we are his people, the sheep of his flock. Go within his gates, giving thanks, enter his courts with songs of praise; give thanks to him and bless his name. Indeed, how good is the Lord, eternal his merciful love. He is faithful from age to age* ». (Ps. 99, 3-5).

Each time he thought about the communities he had founded, he wrote to them, thanking first God for their faith and their life testimony. From Corinth, he wrote to the Romans : « First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the

whole world » (Rm 1,8). From Ephesus, he writes to the Corinthians; « *I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus that you were enriched in everything by him in all utterance and all knowledge, even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you* » (Cor 1, 4-5). From his prison, he writes to the Ephesians : « *Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened* » (Eph. 1, 15-18). These are only a few examples.

Paul's thankful attitude is always turned towards God, never towards himself. Himself is only an instrument in God's hands to comfort those attracted by the Risen Christ, by the beauty of his word, by the fraternal love shown by a gratuitous assistance, a forgiveness given and accepted, a sign of benevolence and a blessing.

III- The consecrated person, a man in prison or a man free and thankful?

Augustine of Hippone preached this : « *When fortune smiles to you by material goods : none among your parents are dead, nothing has dried in your vineyard, there has been no hail, the vines do not show any signs of infertility, your barrel does not smell of vinegar, no miscarriage in your cattle. If you recover whatever civil dignity, nobody has shown disrespect to you. On all sides, you have friends, not only alive and healthy, but also faithful in their friendship ; the customers are not missing. The children respect you, the slaves tremble in front of you, your wife is in total harmony with you. Such a house is said happy* ». Am I happy ? Yes or no ?

When a prisoner acknowledges why he is condemned, he takes the way that shall lead him to the freedom dreamed, desired, and impatiently waited for.

Pope Francis helps us to free ourselves from our prisons to savour true freedom. Those are the illnesses or the temptations of the consecrated person :

- *the spiritual Alzheimer illness* makes someone live in an absolute dependance of one's own visions, often imaginary such as passions, whims and fads. The affected person has lost the memory of his meetings with the Lord, becoming more and more a slave of the ideas he has carved with his own hands. Paul always kept in mind his meeting with Jesus of Nazareth he persecuted.
- *The existential schizophrenia* hits those who abandon the pastoral service, who limit themselves to the bureaucratic affairs, losing contact with reality and with the persons. He creates for himself a parallel world or lives a double life. After having known Christ, Paul does not live as a witness of the Risen in public and as a pharisean privately.
- *The illness of chattering and gossip* takes hold of the person, transforming him into a sower of zizania, or even a deliberate killer of his fellows' reputation . Paul has always had the courage, personally or by letters, to focus openly the attention of the communities he founded on the virtues to cultivate and the vices to fight ;
- *The illness consisting in divinizing the chiefs*, typical of the one who courts the superiors, is the victim of careerism and opportunism, and is living the service thinking only of what he must

get and not of what he must give . Paul did not hesitate to separate himself of some fellow-travellers, jealous and turned towards themselves, and to send them back home.

- *The illness of lack of interest for the others.* The more experimented does not put his knowledge to the service of less experimented brothers ; on the contrary, out of jealousy or by guile, he enjoys seeing them in difficult situations instead of encouraging them. Paul never abandoned his collaborators, apostles like him or lay people engaged for the mission .
- *The illness of the funeral face* of the grumpy, severe, rigid, hard and arrogant persons. A theatrical severity and pessimism are often symptoms of fear and of lack of confidence. The apostle must endeavour to be a polite, serene, enthusiastic and joyful person who transmit joy. Paul's letter to the Ephesians is considered as the letter of joy.
- *The illness of accumulation* comes when the apostle tries to fill an existential void in his heart by accumulating material goods, not out of necessity but only to feel secure. Paul works only to earn his life without being a charge for the community or for collecting money to help the poor in Jerusalem.
- *The illness of exhibitionism* and mundane profit of the person who transforms his service into power, and his power into merchandise, in order to obtain mundane profits or more power. Paul does not hesitate to lose everything in order to gain Christ.
- *The illness to feel self-sufficient*, to be among those who never criticize themselves, never update themselves, do not try to get better and hide themselves behind an excessive planning. Paul did not hesitate to go to Jerusalem to share with James and the Apostles in a Council.
- *The illness of the mathematical complex* of the person who puts his heart in the numeric growth of the community, among the operational and efficient members. Paul succeeds in leaving the communities he founded and in trusting his collaborators, even if they are less competent.

As a religious of the Sacred Heart of Betharram, do I feel free, in prison, or ill ? What is the weak point in myself and the community ?

Let us listen to Saint Michaël: « I make eager vows ... But the most eager is that you never live in yourself : Let Jesus live in yourself ! »



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